

Running head: SELF-IDENTITY OF AUSTRALIAN ELITE ATHLETES

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

The Impact of Demographic Characteristics, Aspects of Achievement, and Retirement Status
upon the Self-identity, Athletic Identity, and Psychological Well-being of Australian Elite
Athletes

A Dissertation submitted by

Lisa Anne Fraser

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Abstract

Despite the intuitive appeal of the notion of an “athletic identity”, a growing body of research and theory continues to indicate that identity is a complex multidimensional construct. The primary purpose of this dissertation was to investigate the self-identity characteristics possessed by Australian elite athletes, including athletic identity, and the impact that a range of personal and situational factors have upon both the endorsement of multiple dimensions of their self-identity, and their psychological well-being.

Study 1 aimed to investigate the impact of age, gender, aspects of achievement (perceived academic achievement and level of athletic achievement), and retirement status upon levels of athletic identity, endorsed self-identity characteristics, as well as indicators of psychological well-being (self-esteem and life satisfaction). It also aimed to determine whether a distinctive athletic profile exists in relation to the dominant dimensions of identity endorsed by elite athletes. The relationship between the athletic identity levels, life satisfaction, and self-esteem of elite athletes was also explored. A total of 917 athletes on sporting scholarships linked with the Australian Institute of Sport were surveyed using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), Self-Description Questionnaire III-summary items (SDQ III-summary items), General Esteem Questionnaire (GEQ), and Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS). Study 2 employed cross-validation techniques to investigate the findings of Study 1 using a subsequent data set ($N = 310$) aiming to see if the results remained consistent over two different samples of the same population.

Results indicated that Australian elite athletes exhibit a common identity profile that is operating largely independently of the level to which they identify with the athlete role. It was also found that the passion they have for their sport is not restricting them from valuing non sports-related life roles or aspects of self, and therefore is not impacting upon the

multidimensionality of their self-identity. Athletic identity, along with the importance placed upon both sporting/physical ability and academic ability, was found to decline with age. Athletes considering retirement from sport displayed significantly lower levels of athletic identity than those athletes with no plans to retire. Athletic identity was found to be unrelated to life satisfaction; however, further investigation is required into the relationship between athletic identity and self-esteem.

Study 3 was a longitudinal study which aimed to investigate whether the retirement status of elite athletes has a role to play in the self-identity characteristics endorsed, levels of athletic identity, and psychological well-being of athletes over time. It also aimed to explore the impact of the voluntariness of retirement upon all of these factors. Participants were 62 Australian elite athletes from three different career transition phases (intending; current; retired). The same survey used in the two previous studies was administered on two occasions, five years apart. On the second administration, the survey included a qualitative retirement questionnaire.

The same identity profile reported in both Studies 1 and 2 was found to continue in this study. Athletes who retired over the five-year period reported a significant increase in life satisfaction, while retirement status was found to have no impact on athletes' levels of self-esteem. Results also indicated that the extent to which an individual identifies with the athlete role may significantly decrease before he or she actually begins to consider retirement. In light of past research in this area, these results may be interpreted as being an indication that Australian elite athletes may experience a positive transition to post-sport life. Despite this, it appears that those athletes who face an involuntary retirement continue to be at the most risk of experiencing adjustment issues.

The findings of this research can be used to guide individuals who are working with athletes. Athletes should be encouraged to broaden their sense of self while still competing in order to ensure that they are equipped with sufficient coping resources when faced with significant life events, such as injury and career termination, and their life after sport. Recommendations are made as to ways that Australian elite athletes can be supported at government, institute, and individual level.

Keywords: athletes, self-identity, athletic identity, life satisfaction, transition

Certification of Thesis

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software, and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Lisa Anne Fraser

Date

ENDORSEMENT

Professor Gerard Fogarty (Supervisor)

Date

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I would like to acknowledge a number of people for helping me traverse the rocky terrain which stood between the start and finish of this document.

To my family - Mum, Dad, and Tara - I am not sure what or who I would be without knowing that you are always there for me no matter what.

A special note to my mum – you are a unique example of the kind of person I strive to be. Thank you for all the love and laughter, which are two things which have been essential to helping me to continue to push on with this project through all the times of self-doubt. This project is about self-identity, and you have helped me to reflect and find out more about my own, while I write about that of others.

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The quote that sat on my desk for the final year of this project read, “You got yourself this far—you just got to keep going” (Don Ward). I think it suffices to say that to have finally *completed* is a new and welcome feeling.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my friend, Miss Katie Sutter, who left this world on 8th April 2011. The sun no longer shines quite as brightly without you here. You were both my support and my inspiration through the tougher times of the past few years. As you decided to put your own PhD aside, I completed this one for both of us.

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